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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [IR](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: HARIRI TELLS SENATOR KERRY ON-TIME
ELECTIONS PARAMOUNT TO STOP IRAN'S INFLUENCE IN LEBANON

REF: BEIRUT 186

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Saad Hariri told visiting U.S. Senator and Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee John Kerry that it was most important for Lebanon's parliamentary elections to occur as scheduled June 7. Meeting with the Senator on February 18, Hariri was confident his March 14 coalition could win the majority in the elections. He added that the occurrence of elections was the only way to halt Iranian influence in Lebanon. Senator Kerry assured Hariri that the U.S. would do everything it could, without doing harm, to ensure the elections occurred on schedule. Hariri advised the U.S. to "engage with (its) allies, before engaging with (its) foes." However, he believed Syria's respect for Lebanon should be one of the conditions of U.S.-Syria engagement. If Syria and Israel could achieve a full peace deal, Lebanon would be the first to benefit, he explained. Hariri also urged the U.S. to play an active role in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, saying the region had suffered for "too long." In public remarks following the meeting, the Senator called on Syria to respect Lebanon's sovereignty and independence and said the U.S. was watching Lebanon's elections with interest.
End summary.

ON-TIME ELECTIONS
CAN STOP IRAN'S INFLUENCE

¶2. (C) Saad Hariri, along with his advisors Nader Hariri, Ghattas Khoury, and Ghazi Youssef, told visiting U.S. Senator John Kerry and the Ambassador that the most important thing for Lebanon was to hold the parliamentary elections as scheduled on June 7. Hariri, confident after a well-attended and successful rally on February 14 to mark the fourth anniversary of the assassination of his father, former PM Rafik Hariri (reftel), said that if the elections were held today, his March 14 coalition would win the majority. He believed Hizballah's March 8 alliance was becoming "worried" and might attempt any tactic to delay the elections. Hariri called the on-time occurrence of the elections the only way to halt Iran's influence in Lebanon for at least four years and prevent it from "taking over the country legally."

Senator Kerry, accompanied by the Ambassador, his wife Teresa Heinz, Senate Foreign Relations Committee staffers Frank Lowenstein and Perry Cammack, and Poloffs, assured Hariri that the U.S. would do everything it could, without doing harm, to assist Lebanon and the March 14 coalition.

13. (C) Hariri compared Iran's behavior to that of the Soviets, in that it is constantly looking to expand its influence outward, but is not spending any money or paying any attention to its domestic issues. During the May 2008 crisis, Hizballah and Iran were stopped due to the show of Arab unity and support for Lebanon, Hariri said. He alleged that at that time, "the West" had begun to consider Lebanon under Iran's influence. However, Iran was experiencing trouble turning Lebanese political decisions to its advantage, he assessed.

U.S. ENGAGEMENT WITH SYRIA

14. (C) When questioned about his recommendations to the U.S. in its approach to Syria, Hariri unequivocally stated that the U.S. should include Syria's respect for Lebanon among its conditions. If the U.S. or other countries wished to engage with Syria, "we don't have a problem with that," he said. However, Hariri encouraged the U.S. to "engage with your allies before engaging with your foes." He assessed the whole region was waiting for the U.S. clearly to define its policy.

15. (C) Hariri also urged the U.S. to push Syria and Israel to reach a full peace agreement. He noted that Lebanon would be

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the first to benefit from such a deal because it would call into question the ability of Hizballah, Hamas, and the People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) to operate in Lebanon. Hariri underscored his skepticism that Syria or Israel would sign such an agreement or that Syria would move away from its alliance with Iran, but said this should be a priority.

16. (C) Senator Kerry assuaged Hariri's concerns by saying respect for Lebanon's independence and sovereignty were non-negotiable. He added that while there may be more U.S. officials visiting the region, including Syria, the U.S. Congress and President Obama would not just take what Syrian President Bashar Asad says "at face value." Senator Kerry said the U.S. was in a genuine listening mode, in large part because many U.S. officials believed the U.S. had put itself at a disadvantage by not engaging, at least diplomatically, with Iran, and perhaps Syria. He continued that the U.S. was "not expecting great change" from Syria, but it was worthwhile to start the conversation.

ARAB-ISRAELI PEACE: LONG OVERDUE

17. (C) Hariri told Senator Kerry that only the U.S. could -- and must -- broker a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The region, he said, had suffered for too long with this conflict and cannot continue to go on the same way. Hariri assessed that President Obama is currently enjoying "unprecedented goodwill" in the region. While achievements would not be made overnight, Hariri urged the U.S. to use this goodwill and always remain engaged.

18. (C) Arabs, he believed, were tired of the conflict and willing to accept Israel's existence, as long as Israel also recognized the Palestinians' right to exist, just as the Arab Peace Initiative proposes, he said. It was also imperative that the Israelis stop building settlements; doing so would build Arab trust, Hariri predicted.

19. (C) On the intra-Palestinian conflict, Hariri said he did not know whether it was possible for Fatah and Hamas to

reconcile. However, the Egyptians were working hard to split Hamas-Gaza from Hamas-Damascus, he said. In a February 17 meeting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Hariri reported Mubarak told him that Hamas in Damascus (i.e. Hamas political leader Khaled Meshaal) was not interested in signing a truce with Israel, and was pulling Hamas-Gaza in the wrong direction. Hariri also advised that Israel should not hold up agreement on a truce with its demand that kidnapped Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit be returned. If the Israelis continued to push this demand, Hariri warned, Egypt, the mediator between Hamas and Israel, would eventually "close its doors and stop talking" with the Israelis.

KERRY'S PUBLIC REMARKS

¶10. (U) Senator Kerry made brief remarks to the assembled press at Hariri's Qoreitem residence following his meeting with Hariri. He highlighted intense U.S. interest in Lebanon and said its "independence, sovereignty and the democratic process" were important to the United States. The Senator also called on Syria to respect these same values in Lebanon.

In addition, Senator Kerry said that the U.S. "looked forward to the elections in June as a very important next step for the people of Lebanon to make their own decision for themselves, about the future of their country." On the Arab-Israeli peace process, he expressed U.S. desire to "reinvigorate and reenergize" the process, in hopes that a final resolution would be achieved.

¶11. (SBU) Senator Kerry did not have an opportunity to clear this cable.

SISON